DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 746 RC 024 002

AUTHOR	Andersen-Spear, Doreen
TITLE	Alaska Native Education: Past, Present and Future.
INSTITUTION	Alaska Univ., Fairbanks. Alaska Native Knowledge Network.
SPONS AGENCY	National Science Foundation, Arlington, VA.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	6p.; Keynote presentation at the Annual Native Educators Conference (Anchorage, AK, 2003).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/sop/SOPv8i2.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Journal Articles (080) -- Opinion Papers (120)
JOURNAL CIT	Sharing Our Pathways; v8 n2 p1-4 Mar-Apr 2003
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	American Indian Education; Bilingual Education; *Cultural Education; Cultural Maintenance; *Educational Needs; *Eskimos; Indigenous Personnel; Native Language Instruction; *Role of Education; School Community Relationship; *Teacher Recruitment; Tribally Controlled Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Alaska

ABSTRACT

The Inupiaq of Alaska's North Slope are the first Inupiaq to have achieved self-government. The greatest significance of home rule is that it enables the Inupiaq to regain control of their children's education. The North Slope Borough schools must implement a bilingual and bicultural program that teaches children in their Inupiat language, with English as the secondary language. To attain this goal, teachers are needed who are bilingual and bicultural, knowledgeable in Inupiat culture and values. Foremost, Inupiaq must be encouraged and trained to become teachers. Responsive teachers who are willing to learn the Inupiat language and cultural values must be recruited. Teachers should be trained and offered financial incentives to become proficient in the language and culture. Current teachers should be evaluated to ensure Inupiat educational philosophies are being implemented. Schools should become part of the community instead of resembling colonial forts. The Inupiat culture is starting to lose its strength within the younger generations. The main barrier between the younger generations and their traditional culture is the lack of an educational system that completely satisfies cultural well-being. For the younger generation to become great leaders, the Inupiaq need to be flexible enough to live in two worlds--to know not only the Western way, but also who they are and where they came from. (TD)

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ED 474 746

Sharing Our Pathways

VOL. 8, ISSUE 2
Mar/Apr 2003

A newsletter of the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative
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Alaska Native Education: Past, Present and Future

by Doreen Andersen-Spear

The following article was the keynote presentation at the 2003 Native Educators Conference banquet. Doreen was born in Barrow and is a student at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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The following article was the keynote presentation at the 2003 Native Educators Conference banquet. Doreen was born in Barrow and is a student at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

We Iñupiaq are a nation of people occupying the circumpolar Arctic from Siberia through Alaska, Canada and Greenland. We share common values, language, culture and economic systems. Our culture has enabled us to survive and flourish for thousands of years in the Arctic where no other man or culture could. Among our entire international Iñupiaq community, we of the North Slope are the first Iñupiaq who have achieved true self-government with the formation of the North Slope Borough. We have the greatest opportunity to direct our own destiny as we have for the past millennia.

Conference participants gather on stage at the NEC banquet in Anchorage.

Possibly the greatest significance of home rule is that it enables us to regain control of the education of our children. For thousands of years, our traditional method of socializing our youth was the responsibility of the family and community.

From the first, visitors of the Arctic universally commented on the warm disposition of our children. Corporal punishment was absolutely unknown. Boys and girls began their education with their parents and, by the time they reached their teenage years, they had mastered the skills necessary to survive on the land. From that time forward the youth—with

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Sharing Our Pathways is a publication of the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative, funded by the National Science Foundation Division of Educational Systemic Reform in agreement with the Alaska Federation of Natives and the University of Alaska.
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their family and within their community—devoted their education to their intellectual and social growth.

For 87 years, the BIA tried to destroy our culture through the education of our children. Those who would destroy our culture did not succeed. However, it was not without cost. Many of our people have suffered. We all know the social ills we endure today. Recently, I heard a member of the school personnel say that many of our Iñupiaq children have poor self-concepts. Is it any wonder, when the school systems fail to provide the Iñupiaq student with experiences which would build positive self-concepts, and the Iñupiaq language and culture are almost totally excluded?

My children and yours spend many hours in school each day, 180 days each year for 12 years. We must have teachers who will reflect and transmit our ideals and values. We must have Iñupiat-centered orientation in all areas of instruction. I do not want my children to learn that we were "discovered" by Columbus or Vitus Bering. I do not want to hear that we were barbaric or uncivilized. I do not want our children to feel inferior because their language and culture are different from those of their teacher. I do not want to see school planning surveys which list hunting, fishing, whaling or trapping as "social" or "recreational" activities.

The land claims movement and the self-determination attitude of the Alaska Natives were largely responsible for the removal of the suppression of our Native languages and culture. Bilingual instruction became the new education policy. However, this has generally meant that we use English as our primary language of instruction and somehow integrate Iñupiat into the curriculum.

The North Slope Borough schools must implement a program that is bilingual and bicultural. Our children must be taught in our Iñupiat language, with English as the secondary language. To attain this goal, we must have teachers who are bilingual and bicultural, knowledgeable in our Iñupiat culture and values. This can be achieved either with instructors who are Iñupiat or who have been trained in Iñupiat.

What can we do about this problem?

- We must develop a teacher recruitment and training program to satisfy our needs.
- Foremost we must encourage and train our own Iñupiaq to become teachers.
- Recruit responsive teachers who are willing to learn both the Iñupiat language and our cultural values.
- Train teachers and offer financial incentives to those who become proficient in our language and culture, in addition to Iñupiat history and ideologies.
- Evaluate current teachers to insure Iñupiat educational philosophies are being implemented.

Americans are beginning to assess their own values and finding them compatible with our own. We can now afford to be selective in our teachers. We should select teachers who are willing to become contributing members of the community. We must strive to break down the barrier between community and the school. Rather than being an integral part of the community, the schools and teacher housing resemble a colonial fort. We must end teacher segregation.

We must rid ourselves of these temporary residents who are here merely for financial gain. A number of teachers have already demonstrated their willingness to live among us as neighbors and friends. They have become permanent members of the community. They identify with us and share our concerns.

Our teachers are the highest paid teachers in the entire United States. What are we getting for our money? We should be able to hire the best bilingual-bicultural teachers in the

world. We should have teachers who can teach well in Iñupiat schools. We should have the best schools in the nation, surpassing any of the elite prep schools in the east. We should have teachers who earn their keep by effectively teaching our children.

I feel certain that the school board members share my frustration and concerns. It is important to remember the lessons of the past. In addition, we must research and master the new changes if we are to continue to dominate the Arctic. We have demonstrated we can survive the trespasses which have been perpetrated upon us. We have been successful in establishing our own home-rule government. We have been able to achieve self-government. We must strive to insure that our borough, our city governments and our school systems reflect our Iñupiat ideals. We are Iñupiaq.

My name is Doreen Andersen Spear. My *aaka*, Rebecca Hopson, named me Maligian. My presentation this evening was a word-for-word recital of parts of a speech my *aapa*, Eben Hopson, Sr., gave on December 19, 1975 at the Teachers Affiliation Union's contracting meeting in Barrow. His words still ring true today. They mean so much to me. They are part of my roots and I keep them strong and alive by remembering them.

My *aapa* was the founding mayor of the North Slope Borough. He was denied a high school education by the BIA, which only motivated him to build high schools and improve the educational system on the North Slope. Now there is a middle school in Barrow named after him and a life-size statue with an inscription that reads, "Education is the key to success. Do not let anything stand in your way in your pursuit of education."

I'm a product of a racially mixed marriage. My dad, Ralph Andersen, is Yupik and Danish. My mom, Flossie Hopson Andersen is Iñupiat and English. I don't know much about my Yupik heritage, and I know nothing about my Danish and English roots. I claim my Alaska Native heritage. Barrow is the only home I know. I was born and raised there.

I have seen our Iñupiat culture start to lose its strength within the younger generations. Living among Iñupiat Elders is a life experience and to learn anything of my Iñupiat culture is dear to my heart. I do not speak Iñupiaq but this does not discourage me to learn more. As I grow older, my desire to acquire the knowledge of my Elders also grows. I only hope the younger generations also consider strengthening our culture—keeping our roots strong—as a priority.

From my earliest childhood memories my parents stressed the importance of education. They are both college graduates and are my role models. My mom and dad enrolled me in early childhood education when I was four years old. They also taught me the need to know my family, my culture and my roots. I know they are proud of me.

My mom and dad encouraged me to participate in bilingual and bicultural activities while I was growing up. Mom taught me some of my Iñupiaq language at home. I learned how to sing and motion dance in the Iñupiat way. But this does not make me any less proud of my other cultural roots.

I am only one person and I cannot represent those who chose not to learn about their Native traditions and Native heritage. I observed my peers who chose not to participate actively in bilingual and bicultural classes, dances and community activities. I was always curious why many parents did not encourage their children to learn their Native culture.

I like the theme for this conference—Keeping Our Roots Strong—because it made me really think hard about my roots and my generation in the context of education.

The formal education of Alaska Natives is a classic example of a clash between cultures. The values of the Western educational system of speaking, reading and writing in the English language and studying Western history, concepts and ideas, conflict with the values, beliefs and traditions of Alaska Natives. For generations, it was more important for our people to gather and harvest subsistence foods than it was to learn how to read and write English.

Educating Alaska Natives in the ways of Western society is a continuing problem today. Contributing factors include the lack of Alaska Native teachers, inadequate criteria and delivery of bilingual and bicultural curricula and students who are not taught their Alaska Native cultures at home.

Many of our people suffered physically and emotionally from being forced to not practice their cultures in school. They suffered corporal punishment for speaking their Native language and personal humiliation and embarrassment for not being able to speak the English language fluently and write it correctly.

Some Native students also had to leave their homes to attend BIA boarding schools when they were only small children in their middle school years. I can't even imagine what that must have been like. At the boarding schools, attempts were made to integrate them into the American mainstream with military living conditions and military rules. Many slowly lost touch with important parts of their traditional ways and beliefs and many lost their Native language.

Natives who were fortunate enough to complete their education returned home and had children of their own. Their situation was a frustrating dilemma. On one hand, they were not fully accepted by their people because they no longer spoke their language or were able to practice their cultural ways. On the other hand, they were not accepted by Western society because of their skin color. While many wanted to teach their children the ways and traditions of

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their ancestors, they simply could not.

My generation is facing a similar dilemma and problems with cultural identity. We feel pressures to advance and succeed in Western ways, yet keep solid footing in and strengthen our cultural roots. We face cultural identity issues and hard decisions.

Many, like me, are from mixed cultures. Which culture are we supposed to choose for the foundation of our lives? Is it wrong to choose one over another? Which roots do we keep strong without neglecting others? Will we be accused of favoring one culture over another when, in fact, combined together they make us who we are? Those are not new questions and there are no easy solutions. Your challenge as educators is to broaden our minds and vision to help us find answers.

The main barrier between the younger generations and our traditional cultures is an educational system that completely satisfies our cultural well being. I was involved in bilingual and bicultural studies and activities throughout elementary and high school. My formal education has led me to college, but I still lack the cultural knowledge of my ancestors.

In order for the younger generations to be great leaders, we must strive to be flexible enough to live in two worlds. We need to seriously consider our cultures to be the most important parts of our lives. We need the security to make important decisions to build the foundation for our lives. We need to pursue our educational dreams not only in the Western way, but to also gain the cultural knowledge and understanding of who we are and where we came from. We need to know what our roots are and we need to keep them alive so they can grow stronger. We need your help.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak here this evening. Thank you, *quyanakpak!*

Commentary on "Future Alaska Native Educators"

(featured in Sharing Our Pathways, Vol. 8, Issue 1 by Cathy Rexford)

by Nels Anderson, Jr.

My name is Nels Anderson, Jr. of Dillingham. I read the article, "Future Alaska Native Educators," by Cathy Rexford, in the Jan/Feb 2003 issue of *Sharing Our Pathways*. I enjoyed the article and it prompted me to comment and ask some questions that I think people throughout Alaska should be considering.

The article says that 459 out of a total of 8,206 public school teachers are of Alaska Native or American Indian descent. If my math serves me correctly, that is about 5.59%. That is a very sad statistic. That leads me to ask how many Alaska Natives we have working in the university system? I have always felt, to the greatest extent legally possible, that our institutions should reflect the makeup of the population served. One of many places where we, Alaska Natives, exceed our percentage of the total Alaska population is in our jails. Another place where we exceed our percentage of the total population is in our dropout statistics in our schools and university.

"Rather than trying to reinvent the Alaska education wheel, we should mainstream our values and ideas of what is good learning into the school districts we now have at our disposal."

What is the teacher retention rate in our Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs) and rural and remote schools as compared to urban schools? How many of our schools' aides, cooks, janitors and maintenance personnel are Alaska Natives? How many Alaska Native professors and administrators do we have at the University of Alaska? How many of our schools across the state, especially our REAAs and rural and remote schools, have Alaska Native principals, financial managers or superintendents? How many Alaska Natives are there on the University of Alaska Board of Regents at this time? How many of our REAAs are locally controlled by Native school board members?

Question: If what I suspect is true—that most of the REAAs are locally controlled by predominantly Alaska Native school board members, then—why are we not using that power to achieve the goals and objectives identified by the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative? Shouldn't we be making sure that our REAAs are using their power to move toward academic

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